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SUBJECT: Journalism in Burma: Newspapers, the Censor Board, and the Elections

Summary

1. (SBU) Burmese journalists face a restricted and uncertain environment, but a literate public has fueled a recent expansion of privately owned newspapers in urban areas. Self-censorship is prevalent and the Censor Board is heavy handed, though editors generally get along with the current director. Journalists see the upcoming elections as a huge challenge. They view their role as not only reporting on the campaigns, but also explaining the fundamentals of democracy -- yet it's not clear at this stage how much leeway the Censor Board will ultimately allow. End summary.

Embassy Journalism Training

2. (SBU) The Embassy Public Affairs section has funded a variety of journalism training programs, such as sending Burmese reporters to conferences abroad and bringing American trainers to Burma to lead courses on such topics as reporting, photojournalism, feature writing, and newsroom management. Embassy-funded trainers have worked primarily with privately owned newspapers directly, but one grantee also led workshops for the government-sponsored Myanmar Journalists and Writers Association (MJWA, the majority of whose members are from privately owned newspapers). These training programs have given the Embassy and our grantees unique access to newsrooms and the Censor Board.

The Media Environment in Burma

3. (SBU) Burma has very limited press freedom, but a literate urban public with a strong reading tradition and an interest in politics. Burma has among the fastest growing newspaper industries in Southeast Asia; the number of weekly newspapers has gone from just a handful 10 years ago to approximately 150 today. Most of the newspapers -- published primarily in Rangoon and to a lesser extent in Mandalay -- cover non-political issues, like sports and entertainment, with very little hard news about events in Burma or the outside world.

4. (SBU) Members of the press corps with credible training are few in Burma, and the country has no formal journalism education programs. Burma's best journalists -- including virtually all of the top publishers and editors -- have received training, though, usually outside the country. The sharp increase in the number of private weekly journals has driven demand for more journalists, and many of these new hires have little or no training. Reporters are hindered by a restricted, heavily-censored environment and poor English language skills, and earn meager pay. Nevertheless, they appear dedicated and curious.

The Influence of the Censor Board

¶5. (SBU) The Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (read: Censor Board) bans on average 20-25 percent of all stories in a given periodical. Because Burmese reporters tend to get paid only for the stories that make it into the newspaper, self-censorship is prevalent. We understand the censors themselves are risk averse and reluctant to allow articles that could get them into in trouble. Censor Board decisions are final in most cases, but if editors have decent relationships with the censors, especially with the director Tint Swe, they can argue for inclusion of stories, or at least certain elements of them, and sometimes reach a compromise. Some Burmese journalists expect private journals will be able to publish daily after the elections (currently only government-owned newspaper can print daily). However, most editors think officials will only grant licenses for those dailies that least deserve them -- i.e., those that studiously avoid sensitive or controversial coverage.

¶6. (SBU) Current Censor Board director Tint Swe seems to be reasonably well-liked by journalists, particularly in comparison to his predecessor. Several leading editors have indicated they can consult freely with him. A number of media representatives have also noted slightly increased space to report on the United States and international events. For his part, Tint Swe believes the post-election period will bring changes to Burma's private media. He has said more than once that he believes the Censor Board's days are numbered. Practically, it would be hard for the Censor Board, as currently constituted, to manage the dramatic workload increase should the GOB allow daily newspapers; thus, some here expect an eventual shift to a self-censorship model akin to China's. For now, though, it remains the case that Tint Swe is a former military officer. He may aspire for greater press freedom in Burma; but he continues to toe the line and follow instructions from Nay Pyi Taw.

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Covering the Election

¶7. (SBU) We expect newspapers will be very cautious in their election coverage. Editors have told our trainers that they know nothing about elections, and many admit that they have not seen a copy of the 2008 constitution. In addition to being uninformed, many Burmese journalists are deeply cynical about the elections. Journalists tell us many average Burmese feel similarly: ignorant and cynical about elections. Journalists see themselves facing the burdens of informing their readers about the fundamentals of democracy, citizens' rights under the eventual election laws, and the nuts and bolts of voting while also eventually reporting on the campaigns. Observers expect censored, selective coverage of election preparations could benefit government-affiliated candidates. Some editors have told us they may opt not to report on the elections at all if they can't do so fairly.

¶8. (SBU) No one knows where the GOB will draw the line regarding election coverage. Censor Board director Tint Swe said that journalists would be able to interview all candidates without prior permission and publish what is said. However, a police Special Branch officer described to one of our trainers the following rule for journalists covering the election: "Don't behave like an activist and don't send information out of the country." Editors plan to seek further guidance once the election laws are published.

Comment: Building Journalism Skills

¶9. (SBU) Despite continued media restrictions in Burma, Post has been able to arrange successful journalism training programs in Rangoon. The reporters, editors, and even the Censor Board director -- to a more limited degree -- are interested in strengthening the role of media in the country. As is the case with so many other aspects of Burmese society, however, the whims of the generals can set back progress quickly and painfully. With the elections approaching, we aim to continue providing training opportunities to journalists and will monitor how much the government allows -- or

restricts -- the flow of information.